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### A cream pie with rat poison

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A CREAM PIE WITH RAT POISON

*La Madone* in the Netherlands

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Shortly after the publication of *La Madone des sleepings* in 1925, Maurice Dekobra became a household name among Dutch readers and critics. By mapping the critical reception of Dekobra's novel in the Netherlands, this article explores the attitudes of Dutch journalists and critics towards popular French literature during the interwar period. Which conceptions of literature and culture were involved and which institutional interests were at stake? What does the reception of Dekobra reveal about the conditions of the Dutch literary field?<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction: French literature and the Dutch literary market place**

On 9 January 1932 the Dutch weekly journal *De Groene Amsterdammer* published an article by the authoritative critic Jan Greshoff in which he lamented the absence on the national book market of translated first-rate novels. Not a single Dutch publishing house had the courage to commission translations of novels by authors such as James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield. With regard to French literature the situation was even worse. Neither *Barnabooth* by Valéry Larbaud, nor *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* by André Gide, nor *Un Homme Heureux* by Jean Schlumberger were available in translation. However, Dutch publishers were keen enough when it came to publishing translations of the bestselling novels of a popular author such as Maurice Dekobra, of whom Greshoff had no high opinion: "I honestly wouldn't think it possible to be so obtuse, so vulgar and so insipid. And when one considers that this writer gets editions of three to six hundred thousand copies, one seriously begins to see the advantages of committing

suicide.” (Greshoff 1931, 83) As a result of this commercially oriented publishing policy, Dutch readers were exposed to the worst cultural products France had to offer. According to Greshoff, this situation was typical of a nation where readers preferred novels of poor quality to real masterpieces, that is to say a nation where cultural mediocrity reigned. (Greshoff 1932)

Greshoff’s bleak diagnosis was both factually correct and motivated by his elitist, ‘highbrow’ idea of literature. Quantitative research into publisher’s catalogues reveals that during the 1920s, over 60 per cent of all novels published by Dutch publishing companies were translations. Novels originating from the English language market accounted for 30 per cent of the total number of translated titles, followed by translations from German (about 14 per cent) and French (2,5 per cent). This ratio (40/60) indicates that during the interwar period the Dutch literary market was dominated by imported titles. (Sanders 2010) The vast majority of this production consisted of popular fiction (Edgar Rice Burroughs, Agatha Christie, Zane Grey, Edgar Wallace) and books we would now qualify as ‘middlebrow’: novels that met the demands of the expanding reading public in search of instruction and as well as through entertainment. (Brown & Grover 2012) The translation policy of Dutch publishers was clearly directed towards established classics (from Homer and Virgil to Balzac, Zola and Verne) and towards popular novels by internationally renowned contemporary authors such as Jack London, P.G. Wodehouse, Vicky Baum and André Maurois; that is: novels that could be sold to both lending libraries and to a wide audience of individual readers who had the necessary time, money and reading skills to be able to buy and read these books. (Sanders & Rutten 2015) The main reason for publishers not to commission translations of novels by so called ‘high modernists’ was the fact that those who read Joyce, Woolf, Gide or Larbaud – readers who learned foreign languages in secondary school – read their books in the original. It was not until after the Second World War that a substantial market for translations of modernist fiction emerged. (Andringa 2006)

Literary periodicals were strongly focused on foreign literature as well. During and shortly after the First World War, several leading periodicals reorganized their book review sections in order to provide their readers with a more complete and coherent overview of the international literary production, with particular focus on French literature. In 1906 the monthly literary magazine *Den Gulden Winckel* (founded in 1902 with the aim to review as many books as possible) started a section on French literature, which became a regular feature in this magazine from 1913 onwards. For this purpose, the editors appointed a team of specialized critics to publish their reviews of

French books – both in the original and translated – in this rubric. In that same year the Roman Catholic magazine *Boekenschouw* created a section dedicated to French literature and in June 1917 the weekly magazine *De Amsterdammer* started a section ‘New French Books’, directed by the Dutch Romanist Johannes Tielrooy. The decision to foreground French literature reveals the special significance and value attributed to this language and literature. Indicative of the trend to strengthen the international critical orientation was the creation of a special section on ‘Foreign Literature’ in the authoritative monthly literary periodical *Groot Nederland* in 1917. While book reviews were previously published in the general section ‘Literature’, the chief editor Frans Coenen – probably inspired by the international review policies of French periodicals such as *Mercure de France* and *La Nouvelle Revue Française* – decided to appoint specialized book reviewers (poets, critics, scholars) for the subsections on French, German, English and Italian literature. (Sanders 2010, 310)

The interest in French literature did not appear out of the blue. French language and literature were regarded as highly prestigious in what Pascale Casanova has referred to as ‘the world republic of letters’. (Casanova 2004) Due to this esteem, France was able “to create a flourishing export trade in fiction, while importing very little”. (Glover & McCracken 2012, 5) Moreover, during the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century French served as a lingua franca in both transnational cultural relationships between European countries and in international diplomacy. (Brems, Sanders & Vandenbussche 2013) As a result, French literature played an important role in the repertoires of Dutch authors and critics. Leading critics such as Greshoff defended their conception of literature, their societal and political views and their position in the literary field by referring to French authors. Some authors could serve as models (Gide), others, such as Dekobra, rather served as anti-models.

### **The making of Dekobra**

Maurice Dekobra first came to the attention of the Dutch reading public in 1918, when Dutch booksellers advertised his satire *Sammy, volontaire américain* and his novel *Grain d’Cachou*.<sup>2</sup> Soon after he appeared on the literary scene critics started questioning the cultural value and the moral implications of Dekobra’s immensely popular work. In 1923 a theater critic of *De Hollandsche Revue* deplored the staging of Dekobra’s comedy *De parel van Chicago* (*Le perle de Chicago*) by the renowned theater company ‘Princessegezelschap’ in The Hague. The performance included a slapstick boxing match, without

permission from the local authorities. After attending one of the performances the critic came to the conclusion that he was living in “a miserable time” in which the theatrical farce reigned, since all that counted in the world of theatre was money. Audiences only desired vulgar comedies as “spiritual food” and this negative trend would continue as long as theatre companies denied their responsibility to enhance public taste. (A.E. 1923) The dismissal of Dekobra on moral and artistic grounds would soon prove a leitmotiv in the critical reception of this author. But there were also critics – particularly on the political left – who applauded his work.

Given his popularity in France, it comes as no surprise that Dutch publishing companies were interested in providing the book market with translations of Dekobra’s new novels. In November 1925 the socialist daily newspaper *Het Volk* commissioned the Dutch translation of *Mon Coeur au ralenti* (*Een snoepreisje*) and published it as a *roman feuilleton*. A novel set in America and written by a Frenchman would, according to the editors, combine “the excitement of a wild adventure novel” with “the temptation of the graceful French spirit”.<sup>3</sup> In 1926 publishing company ‘Ontwikkeling’ published the novel in book form. On that occasion the socialist critic A.M. de Jong recommended the book for its anti-capitalist and anti-American tenor. He called it a caricature of a society in which nothing is safe or sacred as soon as gold and money come into play. (De Jong 1926) Catholic critics on the other hand rejected the novel (in which a certain Prince Séliman commits adultery) as outright immoral. (Anonymus 1927) More translations would follow. It seemed that more than one publisher was eager to acquire at least one Dekobra title.

In the mid-1920s, Dekobra became a celebrity, to such an extent that ‘a Dekobra’ could function as the indicator of an entire cultural genre. Moreover, ‘Dekobra’ could figure in Dutch fiction. In ‘Mijn vriend de zelfmoordenaar’ (‘My friend the suicidal’), a short story by the Dutch author and actor Jan van Ees, the reader finds the protagonist sitting in front of the fireplace “reading a pleasant novel by Dekobra”. (Van Ees 1927). And in the novel *Venetiaansch avontuur* (1931) by Johan Fabricius – a book that resembled Dekobra’s *La Madone des sleepings* with respect to cosmopolitanism, travel and adventure, popular culture and modern life style – we find the following passage:

They are sitting cozily together and talk about what is important: Big Bill and Wimbledon and Le Bal des petits lits blancs that they saw in Paris. About music too: Hylton and his boys. Literature: Oppenheim and Sabatin and a very sinful author whom in fact they are not allowed to read: Maurice Dekobra. (Fabricius 1931, 109)

Critical reception of Dekobra really took off when publishing company 'Zuid-Holland' in The Hague published the authorized Dutch translation of *La madone des sleepings* in May 1927: *De Madonna der slaapwagens. Cosmopolitische roman*. Dekobra's most celebrated novel was translated by Andries de Rosa, a Jewish translator and composer who had made a name as the Dutch translator of, among others, Gustave Flaubert (*Salammbô*), Edmond de Goncourt (*La fille Élisa*), Henri Barbusse (*L'enfer* and *Le Feu*) and Romain Rolland (*La Vie de Tolstoj*) and who would publish his first and only novel *Sarah Crémieux* in 1929. Except for *La madone*, his translations were published by the leading literary publishing company Querido. De Rosa was a close friend of the publisher's brother, the popular Dutch novelist Israël Querido, whose novel *De Jordaan* he would translate into French. As a socialist, De Rosa was committed to the task of educating workmen by providing them with affordable books. In 1905 he founded the society 'Hollandia' in Paris, a community college where Dutch expats could become acquainted with art and literature.<sup>4</sup>

With *De Madonna der slaapwagens*, the publishing company had a potential bestseller. What also contributed to the fame of this novel was Marco de Gastyne's 1927 film adaptation, starring Claude France as Lady Diana Wyndham and Olaf Fjord as Prince Séliman. Dutch national and colonial newspapers regularly published ads for this film and whole-heartedly recommended it for its supposed anti-communist tendency: "This movie shows us the gruesome prisons of the Soviets, the many indescribable scenes and the horrific treatment to which usually innocent prisoners are exposed."<sup>5</sup>

Newspapers couldn't get enough of Dekobra and his celebrity status. They cheerfully speculated about the wealth of the author and the impressive circulation figures of his books. One journalist mentioned that the windows of renowned Parisian department stores displayed him as a mannequin, along with celebrities such as Charles Lindbergh and André Tardieu. (Anonymous 1932) French literature is under the spell of a real "publicity fury", wrote the national newspaper for the book trade (*Nieuwsblad voor den Boekhandel*) in 1928. As a result of this latest trend in commercialization, readers would know a book even before having read it. Throughout Paris, one could see billboards, advertising for the new bestsellers and people queuing up for authors signing copies of their latest books. Genuine admirers could even buy cloth dolls of their favorite literary writer or character. It's only a matter of time before we witness Maurice Dekobra dressed as a train driver or a railway guard! What intrigued and troubled both critics and reporters was the successful merging of popular literature with two other modes of commercial culture: stage and screen. "It has been said that the cinema is killing the reading of books, but

inflated publicity will be the final blow. Would the early literary craftsmen: men such as Flaubert or Jules Renard, not turn in their graves because of these mercantile methods?" (Anonymous 1928)

Dekobra thus roused both bewilderment and admiration. This author made literature look like a competition to win the attention and favor of the masses. Newspapers eagerly reported some of his remarkable financial dealings. "Maurice Dekobra, the author of *De Madonna der slaapwagens*, established a new annual award (3000 francs) for the best adventure novel." (Anonymous 1927b) By the end of the 1920s, Dekobra was first and foremost a news item. When his international reputation was compromised, Dutch newspapers were quick to report on the state of affairs. In 1930 a censorship bureau in Leipzig – the Oberprüfstelle für Schund- und Schmutzschriften – investigated an objection of the Thüringer Ministry of Foreign Affairs against the admission and distribution of three translated novels by Dekobra that were considered pornography. "After lengthy deliberation the Bureau rejected the objection, because [these] literary works could not be regarded as morally perilous for young people". (Anonymous 1930)

The response to Dekobra in Dutch newspapers confirmed and probably strengthened the image of the author as a celebrity in his day, whose publishers could make good money by making clever use of the latest techniques in advertising and merchandising.

### **Reception of Dekobra in literary periodicals**

Whereas Dutch newspapers discussed Dekobra as a news item, literary periodicals took a more critical stance towards the author and his novels. Symptomatic of their reluctance regarding Dekobra is the way Edmond Sée – a French author and theater critic working for the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* – introduced his work to the readers of the 'Kroniek der Fransche Letteren' ('Chronicle of French Literature') in September 1928. According to Sée, Dekobra has nothing to do with literature in the proper sense of the word. The plotlines of his novels are sensational and entertaining as well as implausible; their style and psychology are superficial. But as the summer holidays come to an end, Sée decides to read the latest Dekobra (*La Sérénade au Bourreau*), after all: "One cannot neglect a novelist, even in this particular genre, whose success increases continuously, whose fame expands every day and who reaches innumerable readers". (Sée 1928) Yet that was what the majority of critics in Dutch literary journals did: they chose not to pay attention to Dekobra and *De Madonna*, in spite of (or precisely because) the expanding fame of the author and the numerous readers of the novel.

In the 20s and 30s, reviews in literary periodicals were the leading form of criticism, still considered far more important and thorough than the more journalist type of criticism in the daily newspapers. There existed a wide range of literary journals, some geared towards literary innovation and the defense of quality against an emerging mass culture, others, such as the above-mentioned magazines *Den Gulden Winckel* and *Boekenschouw*, directed at informing the public about the constant supply of new novels. Especially in the latter type one would expect reviews and articles on *De Madonna*, but in both categories the lack of references to the famous author and his bestselling novel is striking. Even critics who were in charge of the aforementioned sections on French literature, conspicuously seemed to neglect Dekobra – they presumably classified him as one of those boisterous authors who didn't need or deserve any additional attention. In the opinion of critics Dekobra was more of a trademark than a literary author. In their letters, the authoritative modernist critics Menno ter Braak and E. du Perron referred to 'a Dekobra' as a well-known type of author. Gossiping about a fellow author, Du Perron wrote: 'he thinks he is Tolstoy, while in fact he is Dekobra'. (Du Perron to Ter Braak, 13 July 1934)

What was indeed at stake here seems to be deliberate neglect. That impression becomes stronger when we notice that the few more lengthy reviews that were published, firstly expressed critical concerns and warnings. In that sense, these reviews are significant because they reveal some of the main issues in literary criticism in a decade that witnessed a significant growth and commercialization of the Dutch book market.

It was not only Greshoff who was deeply concerned with the rapidly growing commercial market of popular culture that seemed to be infiltrating in literature. In fact this was a hot topic in literary criticism in general. The concept of the 'bestseller' was only recently introduced in Dutch critical discourse and the term had no positive connotation. Most critics were on a mission to protect literature by fencing it off from the advancing commercial forces. They developed quite an idiom of words linked to market and commerce in order to draw a sharp distinction between this area and literature. So when they emphasized notions such as market, industry, production, consumption, bestseller, fashionable book, advertising, publicity, success, income, revenues, circulation, numbers of copies and sales figures, their intention was to exclude the indicated texts and authors from the domain of literature. The same was true for words such as craft, skill, confection, fabrication as these referred to a mentality that was thought to be the opposite of the attitude of a real literary author.



As we have seen, Dekobra featured in the newspapers as a prime example of the commercial successful bestselling author which sealed his fate in the world of serious literature. When critics such as Frans Hulleman in *Den Gulden Winckel* or Johannes Tielrooy in *Critisch Bulletin* used words like 'manufacture', 'novel producer' and 'profit' it was immediately clear they localized *De Madonna* outside literature, namely in business. The same did Ter Braak and Du Perron; in their aforementioned exchange of letters they ranked Dekobra among the 'novel manufacturers' (romanfabrikanten) to whom they wished to pay no attention at all in their new periodical *Forum* (1932-1935); they declared "that we have decided never to write about these novel producers and that we in *Forum* concentrate on what can be called literature, even if it is Dutch literature". (Du Perron 13 July 1934)

Popular books were considered to endanger literature and literary quality in several respects. Some of these books, and especially *De Madonna*, were a moral threat, as the catholic critic A. Gielen s.j. emphasized in *Boekenschouw*. He classified the novel in the category of "abject phenomena of the age" (vooze tijdverschijnselen) because of its sleaziness, lewdness, its perverse sensuality, its pornography that kill the reader's feelings of shame (A. Gielen 1927-1928). Hulleman held the same opinion. In his view, Dekobra had a demonic way of responding to the sensual, titillating spirit of the time. (Hulleman 1927, 185-186) Judgments like these bear the marks of nineteenth century criticism that associated 'realist' French novels with poor morals. (Streng 2013)

However, the main danger of the book was not its indecency but rather its falseness, its fake nature. Books such as these pretended to be something they were not. In *Critisch Bulletin*, Johannes Tielrooy accused Dekobra of creating fake characters in *De Madonna*, characters who are passed off as sophisticated and aristocratic by having them casually playing with their platinum cigarette boxes because that is what readers want: "Dekobra pleases us – and he does it for the money". As Tielrooy states: "the 'chivalry' of the main character in La Madone is plaster for marble"; it is false. So is Dekobra's description of customs and practices such as psychoanalysis, communism, Bolshevism, Soviets and the like: it all looks very interesting, but it doesn't go any deeper than a press cutting. And the same goes for the language which is artificial, showy, quasi-beautiful, quasi-witty but in fact banal; the whole book consists of "banalities that appear to be grand." (Tielrooy 1931, 3) Hulleman in *Den Gulden Winckel* refers to the same pretense and falseness as he uses words such as 'sly', 'untruthful' and 'deceitful': books like this are dangerous phenomena in this day and age. (Hulleman 1927, 185-186)

These kind of objections fit a general argument in critical discourse, an argument that would turn into a main topic in literary criticism in the 1930s. Many critics, discussing the novels of the time, mentioned deceit, quasi, show and façade, cheating and fake. This critical stance has to be seen in the context of the rise of the middlebrow novel in the 20s and 30s and, as a result, the blurring of the clear categories of 'high' and 'low' literature, a development which represented some serious risks in the eyes of critics. Some middlebrow novels cunningly resembled 'real literature'; they had adopted literary features while in fact they were mere commercial products. The average reader could not tell the difference between the two and thought he was presented with real literature, real knowledge, real beauty. So the readers had to be strongly warned: Be careful! This is in fact kitsch, fake, it looks like marble, but it is plaster, it tastes like a cream pie but it contains rat poison: "Parents and carers would act wise by keeping this cream pie with rat poison out of the hands of their children and pupils." (Middendorp 1927)

Especially the avid female readers had to be warned as they were supposed to be very susceptible by nature and to have less judgment. This point of view that women in particular were not capable of distinguishing between literature and commercial kitsch is the reason for which critics firstly addressed them. Tielrooy modeled his review as a letter to a lady friend: civilized ladies should not read Dekobra in public and especially she, the addressee, should know better and let herself not be fooled by this common cynic. Hopefully, Hulleman wrote, Dutch women and girls have too much common sense to let themselves be overcome by this sensational writing and publicity. (Hulleman 1927, 186) But Greshoff knew better. His opinion of women had fallen considerably since he had observed "that this Dekobra is women's favorite author" (Greshoff 1931, 83).

### **'Hollands' versus 'cosmopolitan'**

Dekobra's *Madonna* was proudly presented as a 'cosmopolitan' novel. This subtitle, the author's pseudonym and the whole book were a manifestation of cosmopolitanism, a timely term in the late 1920s. Such a label could be expected to raise discussion in Dutch literary criticism where a debate was in progress about the value of Dutch ('Hollands') versus non-Dutch ('onHollands'). 'Hollands' was a very distinctive key word in critical discourse. A strong divide existed between critics who argued for 'Hollandse' values and those who rejected them. The reviewers of *De Madonna* mostly belonged to the first group, which can be regarded as 'middlebrow'. They defended 'real Dutch novels' that were thought capable of spreading healthy,

positive national values and virtues among the readers. Needless to say that they saw no merits at all in Dekobra's 'cosmopolitanism'. On the contrary, they were afraid that such a fashionable word would add to the dangerous attraction for the readers.

However, a rising number of mostly young critics had enough of traditional Dutch novels and the national, middleclass- or family-values they were disseminating. They vehemently fought against middlebrow novels and against their defenders, middlebrow critics. They explicitly called for novels that were not Dutch, bourgeois or familial ("ónhollandse, ónburgerlijke, ónfamiliale romans"), as Du Perron wrote in *Forum*. (Du Perron 1934, 3) For these critics, a cosmopolitan novel about travel and adventure could be highly refreshing. Recently, they had welcomed a modern and stimulating young Dutch author: the aforementioned Johan Fabricius, whose novels took place in other countries and other spheres than Dutch family life. Johan Fabricius was considered to be an appealing, easy, vivid and modern personality. Despite being Dutch this new author wrote books that were readable, entertaining and good as well. In *De Hollandsche revue* he was enthusiastically compared with Dekobra: "all writing facilities that serve the clever Dekobra, are available to Johan Fabricius to the same degree". (M.K. 1931)

So in theory the time was right for an author like Dekobra; his cosmopolitanism and flair could have provided a welcome alternative for the traditional Dutch novel that in the eyes of many critics had had its time in the late 20s and 30s. However, *De Hollandsche revue* did not represent a serious critical voice. For the leading young critics, no matter how they longed for a more modern and international kind of novel, *De Madonna* was in no way an alternative. Although it was new and modern in a way, it was, as Du Perron stated, in the first place a representation of the whims and wishes of the mass audience – and as such totally contrary to his standard. No literary innovation could be expected from a producer of moneymaking novels, an author who did not operate in literature but on the market of popular goods.

### **Conclusion: Dekobra in the Dutch literary field**

Dekobra functioned as a yardstick in the Dutch literary field of the late 1920s and 1930s. Booksellers and book publishers welcomed and embraced him as a possible favorite of the public and a considerable source of profit. Newspapers did their part in creating and establishing his status as a celebrity by publishing an endless stream of news stories with entertaining bits of trivia and factoids, as well as ads and reports on numbers and sales figures. The

publicity surrounding Dekobra made it more obvious that literature tended to turn into mere popular entertainment.

Precisely this tendency, this response of the market, led to the rejection on the part of literary critics. Dekobra became the incarnation of the growing commercial market of popular culture that was considered the main threat to literature and culture. Critics, regardless of their literary ideas, felt a deep sense of responsibility towards shielding literature from the ruthless market forces. Like Greshoff, they wondered what was becoming of today's culture now that the book market made way for sensational novels like *De Madonna* while important works of art met with all kinds of obstacles.

No single group in literary criticism saw a positive aspect in *De Madonna der slaapwagens*. The novel could not, as some successful middlebrow novels of the time did, play a constructive part in improving and educating the public while entertaining it—on the contrary, the book was thought tempting, misleading and demoralizing. In fact it possessed only the negative characteristics of the middlebrow as it was pretentious, fake and false, a moneymaker produced by a profit-driven cynic. All Dutch critics, divided and opposed in more elitist and more middlebrow groups, had strong reasons to put up a fence to exclude Dekobra from the literary domain. For all of them, he was indeed an anti-model.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article was written in the context of the NWO-funded research project *Dutch Middlebrow Literature 1930-1940: Production, Distribution, Reception*, supervised by the authors. [www.middlebrow.nl](http://www.middlebrow.nl)

<sup>2</sup> The reception documents were found by consulting the portal of digitized Dutch books, newspapers and magazines, [www.delpher.nl](http://www.delpher.nl) and by exploring ten (not yet digitized) leading literary periodicals and weekly magazines: *Boekenschouw*, *Critisch Bulletin*, *De Gids*, *Den Gulden Winckel*, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *De Hollandsche Revue*, *De Nieuwe Gids*, *Eigen Haard*, *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift*, *Groot Nederland*.

<sup>3</sup> *Het Volk*, 14 November 1925.

<sup>4</sup> Information about Andries de Rosa on the website of the *Biografisch woordenboek van het socialisme en de arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*: <http://socialhistory.org/bwsa/biografie/rosa>

<sup>5</sup> Advertisement in *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad*, 17 July 1929.

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